

# Thatcher attacked: Now Howe, 'dumb cow'

by Mark Burdman

"It was more than a resignation speech. It was a bill of impeachment." So wrote Peter Jenkins, one of Britain's most senior political writers, in a front-page commentary in the Nov. 14 London *Independent* on Sir Geoffrey Howe's speech before the House of Commons in which Howe explained his reasons for resigning as British deputy prime minister on Nov. 1. According to Jenkins, nothing like Howe's speech had been heard in the British Parliament since parliamentarian Leo Amery invoked Oliver Cromwell in May 1940 to tell then-Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, "In the name of God, go!" Wrote Jenkins: "Obituaries of Mrs. Thatcher have a habit of proving premature, but she is a mortal politician like any other." Jenkins wrote that on Thatcher's "grave-stone" the words would be inscribed, "She Went Too Far."

Thatcher is facing the most decisive confrontation since she came to power in 1979. In his speech, Howe made an obvious appeal for someone to challenge her when he concluded by speaking of his "conflict of loyalty" between "loyalty to the prime minister and the loyalty to what I perceive to be the true interests of the nation. That conflict of loyalty has become all too great. . . . The time has come for others to consider their response to the tragic conflict of loyalty with which I have myself wrestled for perhaps too long."

## Heseltine will challenge Thatcher

On Nov. 14, Defense Secretary Michael Heseltine announced that he will challenge Thatcher as leader of the Conservative Party, in balloting scheduled for Nov. 20. Heseltine cited differences over policy toward Europe as the main reason for his move, and added that his decision could "not be disassociated from" the resignations of Howe and the 1989 resignation of Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson.

Thatcher's authority and credibility have been massively undermined in Britain, Europe, and throughout the world. The Howe speech was widely characterized as "devastating." Members of Parliament and ministers were heard coming out of the House of Commons after Howe's speech with comments like, "he hasn't just plunged the knife in, he's broken the blade in her back."

Howe's understated savagery, sarcasm, and irony that only a British Establishment figure could conjure up, was interspersed with blunt warnings about the damage Thatcher is doing to Britain. "The prime minister's perceived attitude towards Europe is running increasingly serious risks for the

future of the nation," he said, implicitly accusing her of "subversion" of the process of cabinet government.

Howe invoked former British Prime Ministers Harold Macmillan and Winston Churchill as having had preferable policies. He revealed publicly for the first time that Thatcher had made concessions on aspects of British relations with Europe only after he and Lawson threatened to resign. Howe warned that the risk posed by Thatcher was not imposition of European policies on Britain, but "isolation" of Britain from Europe, thereby undermining "our financiers who seek to make London the money's capital of Europe," and threatening to "leave ourselves with no say in the monetary arrangements that the rest of Europe chooses for itself." He stressed that her policy on Europe had worsened Britain's economic plight—now suffering from double-digit inflation and interest rates.

In one sly moment, Howe recounted having received a letter from a British businessman in Europe, who said that Europeans were tired of Thatcher's nay-saying toward the continent, but believed that most Britons agreed with her. If not, the businessman reported his European friends asking, why did Britons always vote to keep her in power? Howe's message: Thatcher must go!

The effect on Thatcher is more devastating in view of the mid-term elections. On Nov. 8, the Tories lost to the Labour Party in the district of Bootle, receiving slightly over 9%, to 78%—plus for the Labourites. In Bradford North, the Tories received 16.2%—down from nearly 40% three years ago—finishing behind Labour and the usually insignificant Liberal Democrats.

The psychological warfare against Thatcher is mounting. The Nov. 11 *Sunday Times* of London reported that British Undersecretary of Northern Ireland Richard Needham had to apologize to Thatcher when the transcript of a private telephone discussion he had had with his wife was released. In that discussion, he said, "I wish that cow would resign." His wife agreed. The next day, the continental European press was filled with comments about "Thatcher the dumb cow."

Thatcher is responding in her usual "Iron Lady" mode. During her Lord Mayor's Banquet speech, she used a liberal dose of imagery from the game of cricket, to suggest that she was prepared to bash any challenger. Her main card is the war in the Persian Gulf. On Nov. 12, the London *Times* headlined its story about the visit of Defense Secretary Tom King to the Gulf, "King plays Gulf card to boost Thatcher." Three former chiefs of the British Defense Staff, Lords Lewin, Bramall, and Fieldhouse, all made highly unusual political interventions on Nov. 13, warning that Britain must not have a change in leadership at this time because of the danger of imminent war in the Gulf. Also on Nov. 13, Thatcher made an alarmist statement in the House of Commons that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was on the verge of acquiring nuclear weaponry.